

MANUFACTURING EXTENSION PARTNERSHIP

Success Stories from the Field

Mary Ann's Specialty Foods Inc

Iowa Center for Industrial Research and Service

Plant Renovation Assessment

Client Profile:

Mary Ann's Specialty Foods, located in Webster City, Iowa, process meat into cold packed configurations for customers that sell to the larger retail grocery chains in the United States. The company has been in business for 15 years and employs 120 people.

Situation:

Mary Ann's Specialty Foods had issues with waste treatment, questions about plant renovations that would meet stringent food safety regulations, and communication concerns related to having a largely Hispanic workforce. The company contacted the Iowa Center for Industrial Research and Service (CIRAS), a NIST MEP network affiliate and formerly known as the Iowa Manufacturing Extension Partnership, for help.

Solution:

MEP Account Manager Derek Thompson drew on resources available through CIRAS and Iowa State, building a team that included Brenda Martin, community college account manager located at Iowa Central (ICCC); Sam Beattie, assistant professor, food science and human nutrition at Iowa State; and Carolyn Cochran, director, economic development programs at ICCC. One critical area of concern is the discharge of fat, oil, and grease into the sewage system. "A lot of food plants have problems in this area," says Martin. "To protect the environment, the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Natural Resources continue to raise the bar on what plants can discharge. It's a costly problem to solve." Martin brought in staff from the University of Northern Iowa Waste Reduction Center (IWRC) to apply their expertise to the problem. The IWRC recently purchased a small-scale version of equipment to try in plants like Mary Ann's. "We're able to actually test the system to determine whether it can do what we need it to do before Mary Ann's President, Bill Korleski, actually buys a full-scale version to install in his plant," Martin said.

With his business growing 25 to 30 percent a year, Korleski also wanted to improve his current facilities. He purchased the Webster City facility in 1992 and opened it as Mary Ann's Specialty Foods, Inc., in 1993. "It was old then," said Thompson. "Bill wanted to continue to expand his customer base, so it's important to make a good impression by updating it with things like fresh paint and covering exposed pipes." Because food facilities have unique requirements relative to materials and installation practices, Beattie and Martin searched out all the rules and regulations that needed to be followed. They also compiled a list of Midwest contractors who are aware of the special requirements for food plants. Even though there are some 1,500 food companies in Iowa (including facilities that create products for humans and animals), locating the contractors that have experience in food plant renovation was challenging. Beattie, with his expertise in food safety, also provided insight on specific types of questions. For example, Korleski wanted to install a false ceiling to cover pipes and prevent condensate from dripping. Beattie explained that the space between the original ceiling and the false ceiling would need to be air conditioned to prevent the growth of pathogens and mold.

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To ease the communication challenges that come with having a largely Hispanic workforce, Thompson told Korleski about training funds available through the Iowa Department of Economic Development and the ICCC workforce training program. "This is a forgivable loan program to offset the cost of training current employees," adds Carolyn Cochran, Economic Developer. "If a company trains the number of people they say they're going to train within the time they say they'll do it, they don't have to pay it back." To be eligible for such a program, a company needs to be engaged in manufacturing, processing, assembling products, warehousing, wholesaling, or conducting research and development. As a food processing plant, Mary Ann's meets the criteria. Cochran is in the process of writing the training plan that will specify the number of people who will be involved. English as a second language (ESL) will be one component of the plan with other parts yet to be worked out, according to Cochran. ESL classes will begin in February. Ann Waynar, Region V adult basic education, GED, and ESL coordinator, will coordinate the classes.

Results:

- * Purchased new waste treatment equipment.
- * Renovated facilities in order to comply with food safety requirements for food plants.
- * Planned workforce training program (GED and ESL classes).

Testimonial:

"Running a business like this is a challenge. Recordkeeping and paper have become overwhelming with all the new issues related to homeland security. I have key people working with me -- my son Kelly is marketing director, and my sister Pat is plant manager. We keep our heads above water, but the people from CIRAS are my leg. They run down some of this stuff that we don't know exactly where to look."

Bill Korleski, President